MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 1, 2003

TO: Belmont Economic Development Strategy Committee

FROM: Warren Lieberman

RE: Priorities

In response to Craig's email, I'm happy to jump-start the discussion regarding the EDS priorities. With any luck, I'll note a few controversial items that generate multiple responses.

As laid out by Craig, here are the priorities:

1. Downtown
2. Permit Process Reform
3. Business Retention
4. The Arts
5. El Camino North / East Hwy 101

Rather than address these priorities in the order listed, I will address them in the order I think they should be prioritized.

DOWNTOWN

Craig notes that "we have an existing Downtown Specific Plan adopted in 1988 – it envisions a vibrant mixed-use commercial center at Ralston and El Camino Real - the same goal we have today. What issues should a new downtown study address?"

Recently, I attended a lunchtime talk sponsored by Belmont's Chamber of Commerce. Denny Abrams was the featured speaker. Denny was the developer/architect responsible for the 4th Street Project in Berkeley. He led an excellent and thought provoking discussion. (If you were not able to attend and want to hear more about it, please let me know.) In his view, Belmont has really made a mess of things in its development efforts. He believes Belmont's development efforts have all catered to the car rather than the individual. Denny observed that Belmont is a downtown of parking lots and fast traffic; he also noted that Belmont is not pedestrian friendly.

Whether or not you fully agree with him, I believe he makes some valid points. At this point, I would propose that developing an approach towards developing Belmont's downtown in a way that is consistent with the Vision developed by the City should be our number one priority for economic development. Currently, there are many places where the actual state of the downtown and the Vision are in great conflict. While we do not have to agree with Denny's approach to how to address this problem (essentially, he said

don't waste your time developing a grand plan, get control over an area, give total control over to a developer, establish some basic guidelines for the developer to follow, and let the market and time work to your advantage as elements get put in place), the fact that he outlined a specific approach to follow gives us a place to start, as it is something that we could debate, consider alternatives, and hopefully come up with an approach that we believe works best for Belmont.

So, all that said, in response to Craig's question, "What issues should a new downtown study address," I would suggest that we should address the following two issues:

1. Highlight the extent to which the current downtown is consistent/inconsistent with Belmont's vision
2. Given the findings related to the above item, recommend whether Belmont's development approach in the downtown should continue down the current path or identify whether an alternative approach would be better. If an alternative approach is preferable, identify and recommend a better approach

Given this plan, we should then have a basis for taken action.

EL CAMINO NORTH/HWY 101

As noted in the report, the city may be able to gain access to or encourage development on significant real estate, East of Highway 101. This area falls within Belmont's Redevelopment Area, providing the City with a strong opportunity and potential financing if it elects to take a pro-active approach towards assembling and preparing properties for development.

El Camino, North of Ralston Avenue also lies within the City's Redevelopment Area. This area is located close to the Cal Train station, allowing for a variety of projects that could benefit the City. As noted in the Economic Development Strategy report, " [t]he current land use pattern does not reflect the site's potential buildout, per local zoning regulations." Not only is the area close to the CalTrain station, the area is also close to Downtown Belmont and the report notes "[e]xisting uses do not take full advantage of these locational strengths. "

As we already have a financial mechanism and resources to help turn our visions into reality in these areas, I believe this should be our second priority. These areas are highly visible and offer great potential for playing an important role in Belmont's economic future.

BUSINESS RETENTION

I believe there was a strong consensus among the Committee members that the "City should adopt a pro-active approach towards assisting local businesses with space needs, workforce requirements, and infrastructure issues." Aside from some very specific issues, however (e.g., should restaurants be allowed to offer live music), I am not certain that we identified the extent to which businesses are choosing to move out of Belmont, or locate elsewhere, due to City policies and procedures. In short, although I think we all felt this is an important issue, it is not clear to me how large a problem this is, or how big an opportunity it provides.

Consequently, I think it would be a useful and instructive task to carry out some of the specific initiatives identified in the report that do not require a lot of resources and that could be done quickly. Specifically, the report recommends:

- Conduct a series of study sessions and stakeholder workshops with Council and Planning Commission members, local businesses, and developers to explore ways to facilitate the timely approval of development projects.
- Pro-actively contact local employers to provide business support and assistance.
- Engage the NDNU School of Business to support local firms through service learning projects, internships, and research activities

Carrying out these tasks would provide a strong foundation for understanding the issues involved with this priority. Depending on what is learned, we could then determine the best way to move forward with this priority, or whether its priority should be reduced and resources would be better dedicated to other initiatives.

THE ARTS

I suggest that our efforts initially be focused on smaller actions that will help generate visibility and demonstrate commitment, before tackling the issue of developing a performing arts center in Belmont.
The Report highlights some potential focus areas. For example, are there ways to heighten the visibility and success of the 1870 Arts Center? Can an artist cooperative gallery be

established in Belmont? Given the current economic climate, I think the strategy of "walk before running" would be most prudent in this area and is most likely to lead to progress.

Based on the Report's extended discussion of developing a Performing Arts Center (see pages 44 – 46), I am concerned of the financial viability of such a project and the practical difficulties in making this happen. Consequently, I would not want the feasibility study to be the centerpiece of our strategy – from my perspective, this entails too great a risk of nothing happening. Rather, I'd like to see additional "behind the scenes" exploratory work from City Staff and perhaps a citizen's committee.

Although I have listed this as priority 4, I am open moving this to priority 3.

PERMIT PROCESS REFORM

Craig's email notes that the "City has initiated a number of administrative reforms to our permitting process (one-stop center, computer tracking, improved staff reports). What "business-friendly" reforms are still to be examined?"

Have the recently initiated administrative reforms been effective? If not, we need to know why. To what extent is the current permitting process hampering the City's Economic Development? I would like a clear picture of this, to decide on where this issue should be prioritized. At the moment, I do not believe that I have enough information on this item. It might be worth creating a Task Force to answer this question so we better understand where and how to focus our efforts.

Unless we can identify specific elements of the permitting process that are having a serious negative impact to Belmont's economic development efforts, I recommend that this item either be removed from our priority list, or dropped to the lowest position (i.e. fifth priority).